# SOCIAL SKILLS AND LEARNING:

# A Systematic Literature Review

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**(Bachelor of Education)**

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# DECLARATION

I, Kendall Edens, hereby declare that this thesis, except with the Graduate Research Committee's approval, contains no material, which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution. I also affirm that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

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## ABSTRACT

This systematic literature review investigates social skills and learning. Both students and education have changed over recent times. Our new generation of students is strikingly different, because technology has had an enormous impact upon them. This study is an exploration into social skills and learning in primary education. The methodology used for this study is qualitative, mainly looking at the perspectives of expert educational theorists, and an interview with a local educational expert. There is mounting research evidence that students who obtain an exclusively academic education may be ill-equipped for future challenges in life - suggested by such indicators as a rise in bullying in schools, students' poor communication skills, and violence on our streets. There is a growing concern that schools neglect the possible need for social skills and there is a suspicion that schools are far too consumed by academic outcome data. This thesis is a literature review focusing on the question- do social skills affect learning? Quinn and Poirer (2004) believe there has been little research on programs enhancing or supporting social skills instruction. Much educational research related to social skills in Australia, the US, and the UK has highlighted the impact of social skills' programs on behaviour modification, but studies of such programs and their effect on academic outcomes in general have been less frequent. This study, hopefully, will put social skills back on the agenda of educational leaders.

Two key experts will be analysed: firstly, Vygotsky, a Soviet psychologist, who believed that one's development is a result of an individual interacting with their social environment; that learning is entrenched within social events; and that social interaction plays a vital role in learning; and secondly, Goleman, a contemporary psychologist, who re-invented and popularised emotional intelligence (EI). EI refers to the competence to identify, manage and express emotions within oneself and in others. Furthermore, crucial research around the world shows social skills' programs result in improved student learning, behaviour, and academic outcomes. There are government policies and initiatives which encourage schools to foster social skills; for example, the Australian Curriculum and the Melbourne Declaration; however, not all programs have proved to be successful; schools take shortcuts, they fail to implement the programs promised, or they do not implement effective social skills' programs - resulting in many students lacking social skills. Over a decade ago, Comer (US expert in social and emotional learning) described the huge impact a child's school, education and home environment can have on their overall development, arguing that any setting that encourages and supports an individual's social/emotional learning and personal needs, instead of

neglecting them, can have a massive effect on the particular person's education and life overall. The findings from educational experts in this study state that if schools provided students with the opportunities for social skills development, the learners were happier, connected and increased their learning. Drawing on these findings, the implications are for schools to focus more on social skills to increase overall learning, improve skills to prepare for the workplace and ensure ongoing participation in family and community.

# CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

This chapter explains the context and aims for the thesis and provides information that explains the choice of topic. The research questions, researcher contextualisation, educational significance and outline of the thesis are described. In this study, the systematic literature review will be an exploration of educational theories and ideas on the relevant topic. It allows a balance of past and present ideas and views along with an interview with a local expert and my own experiences.

## 1.1 Context

A growing number of experts and educators (Goleman, 2014; McClelland et al., 2007; Wyatt-Smith, 2012) acknowledge that many students are lacking social skills and are not taught such skills, perhaps experiencing a solely academic education, which may ill prepare them for current or later challenges, in and out of school. I would suggest that social skills could be a positive influence on learning. As far back as 450 BC some well-known scholars expressed their displeasure with the behaviour of young people. Socrates wrote:

> The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers. (Gale, K., 2011, p. 1)

If an individual is taught social skills, it is argued, their emotional intelligence (EQ) is increased, resulting in them gaining a massive advantage in their future private and public working lives (Goleman, 2011, p.36). Kennedy-Moore (2011) believes social skills refer to "the abilities necessary to get along with others and create and maintain satisfying relationships" (p. 1). Traditionally, school settings have not done well in nurturing the social and emotional capacities of children or supporting relationships between students and teachers (Benson, 2006; Noddings, 1992). The study that is reported here in this thesis relates to social skills and learning in education. Here the idea that social skills play an important part in an individual's learning will be observed. Evidence tells us that students' social skills significantly affect their academic performance and their basic feelings about school (Wentzel & Wigfield, 1998, p. 155).

The substantial rate of societal change, pressure, violent behaviour and teenage suicide in today's schools and communities affects many people, particularly the young and impressionable in educational settings. Australian crime rates in 2012 were highest for both males and females aged 15 to 19 years. Within this age group, most violent offending peaked around 17 years of age; however, the rate of sexual assaults by 15 year olds was greater than that of 17 year olds (Australian Government, 2012). In Australia, one in every five adolescents is likely to experience a clinically depressive episode by the age of 18. It is estimated that 6 to 7 percent of young people aged 16 to 24 will experience depression in any given year (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007). These problems have been occurring for some time and increasingly in lower secondary levels. In many cases, this pastoral care responsibility has been laid at the door of teachers. Ideally, there could be a partnership of parents and schools to support social skills development with the aim of giving children greater security and happiness in their school and local communities.

This research differs slightly compared to many other theses in that it will endeavour to research and succinctly review the research in the educational field enabling an investigation into whether or not social skills are an important part of learning. It is troubling though that most governments have not seen fit to prioritise social skills recently. Governments should be enforcing and monitoring social skills programs in schools. There should be funds allocated to schools to pay for experts to train teachers in teaching social skills. As a result, there is no encouragement for the community or school leaders to implement programs, curriculum or strategies to enhance and foster social skills and thinking. There is a great need for emerging literature to change schools' outcome-focused charter goals, and to change what it is that parents want from the school they select. Some schools and parents can be tunnel-visioned as a result of the media and government saturating them with NAPLAN (National Assessment Program - Literacy and Numeracy) data and school VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education) average scores (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012; Dulfer, 2013). They are simply wanting schools and teachers to teach content and for their child(ren) to achieve test and ATAR scores and not be worried about how their child(ren) develop as individuals in regard to self-esteem, confidence, empathy, problem solving skills and social skills. But, the researcher wonders, how is a score going to help if a student is socially inept, cannot think for themselves, cannot problem-solve, and is unable to work collaboratively in a team-oriented workplace down the track? A recent interview with world-renowned education expert Dr Pasi Sahlberg from Finland, heard Sahlberg describing national testing like NAPLAN as "harmful" to children…

"The very harmful, problematic thing that comes with it is that it narrows the whole idea of intelligence" (Bourke, 2018, p. 1). If teaching an individual to be socially capable and having empathy and feelings for others seems to be important to Vygotsky (1968 & 1972) and Goleman (2008, 2011, 2014), why is it not considered so more broadly? Lev Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist who changed the educational landscape more than half a century ago. Daniel Goleman is a contemporary psychologist who has reinvigorated the concept of emotional intelligence (EI), which has transformed how schools and businesses operate by highlighting how EI is just as important, if not more important, than an individual's cognitive skills (or IQ). These two theorists are the main sources for the theoretical framework. Later in Chapter 2 they will be discussed in detail. This section has enabled the history and context to be set up within which this study may operate.

## 1.2 Aims and Research Questions

Below, the intention, specific aims and related questions are listed. This provides the focus and format of this study.

The intention of my research was to investigate if social skills affect learning and to what extent they impact upon academic performance in the educational setting. It will focus on the social variables that work together to enable learners to feel comfortable and motivated to learn. There is considerable debate currently within education circles on whether data-focused curriculum (involving minimal social interaction) or inquiry-focused curriculum (incorporating a great amount of social interaction) is the best for schools.

The first aim of this study was to complete a systematic review of literature on social skills and learning.

The second aim of this thesis was to confirm whether or not 'social skills' have an impact on individual learning and academic outcomes. If so, is there a negative or positive?

The third aim was to explore the theories of educational experts, Vygotsky and Goleman, to ascertain their views of social skills and their relationship to academic outcomes. If this information is gathered and disseminated to the educational community, it may provide valuable insights and information for recipients.

The fourth aim was to systematically reviewing the literature to answer the research questions below.

As a result of the research focus, the driving research question that this study seeks to answer is:

- Do social skills affect learning?

The subsidiary research question is:

- If so, how? Is there a negative or positive effect?

As you can see, I am interested in researching social skills and learning in educational settings.

## 1.3 Researcher Contextualisation

As a young teenager a long time ago, it was interesting to watch my mum teach students and see the amount of passion and positive relationships within the classroom. This was a major factor for me to be motivated to become a teacher. Ever since I commenced educational studies, and throughout my teaching career, I have often thought about what constitutes a capable learner and what key factors affect learners in the educational setting. I have gradually learnt that all children learn in different ways, at different rates, and with varied motivation, and exhibit a range of innate and habitual characteristics. When I had to select a topic to study for this thesis, it was natural that I would like to research how students learn and what assists the process. After some thought, I decided that I was interested in social skills and learning.

Most educators have rewarding experiences in their workplace settings, creating a feeling of great satisfaction and empowerment. Likewise, there can be times when one feels dissatisfaction: the organisation is not providing something it ought to, or it is not focused in the right direction, for instance. Both sets of circumstances provide the motivation or inspiration for research. For me, the time had come to research the link between social skills and academic outcomes. Being a teacher allows me to complement my educational research by experience in the classroom.

## 1.4 Educational Significance

It was hoped that this study might be of relevance to the education sector by helping to understand the role of social skills in learning. If governments, schools and the wider community realised that a majority of children lack social competencies and, in response, accepted greater responsibility for both developing our children socially and addressing their need for connectedness to their environments - home, school and other settings - it would create a better world for children to inhabit.  Research shows that schools will be increasingly effective in their goal of improving student performance when they employ their effort and funds to promote, in tandem, children's academic and social skills (Zins et al., 2004, p. 3).

This research proposes to be of value in a range of educational settings, including schools, teachers, parents and students, by providing the Australian and international educational communities with research on social skills and learning. The information gleaned on social skills programs offers research to those practitioners who wish to reflect more on the implementation of social skills programs and general social skills of today, and provide  some positive and negative aspects of schools' social skills program(s). Theories and data presented in this study may provide the Australian and international educational communities with a much needed perspective on students' social skills and academic performance. School leaders in general who tackle this research can read about the kind of environment that schools should be striving to create for maximal outcomes for students. This study will allow the leaders mentioned above to understand and monitor their students' ability to develop key social skills required by individuals to feel connectedness to their school. By reading this thesis it may extend teachers' knowledge and awareness regarding the effects of social skills on the academic performance of students.

## 1.5 Thesis Outline

The remainder of the thesis will be presented in the following order: In Chapter Two, the researcher outlines the history and context for the study, the theoretical framework within which this study will be described, research on the relationship between social skills and learning from the perspective of constructivists and cognitivists will be explored, including the views and work of two prominent experts in the field, past and present, other relevant empirical work will be highlighted, and a conclusion. Chapter Three will be concerned with

the type of research implemented, specific type of research carried out, the study design, the timeline and setting, an analyses/coding of data and information from the experts and an interview with a local expert. In Chapter Four, the Finding and Discussion for this study are detailed. This will be followed by Chapter Five, where the conclusions regarding the initial questions, the limitations of this study, implications for the research presented and a final conclusion, will be detailed.

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the history and context behind this study will be explained. This is followed by the theoretical framework. Later, I will be setting the stage for this study, which involves the Constructivists and Cognitivists.

Research has shown that many young people today lack social skills. This is evidenced by, among other factors, the rise in bullying in schools and the level of violence in the streets. By interacting and playing with others, children learn to understand and respond to others, and are able to use their developing social skills to modify their emotions and behaviours in accordance with circumstances; however, Hart (2011) says children are now spending less time playing and interacting with other children. Nowadays, the opportunity for children to do this has decreased, with parents apparently concerned about safety and "stranger danger". Busy lifestyles, attitudinal change, technology and lack of social skills have also been blamed for this decline. According to Manicavasagar (2013, cited in *The Age*, McSweeney, p. 5) from UNSW, "modern children are subject to many more stresses than those of previous generations – swamped in technology, experiencing cyber-bullying and pressure to try drugs and alcohol at an early age". Schools are relied upon more than ever to educate students, but this has predominantly become about improving test scores. While teaching children social skills and basic life skills seems to have been forgotten - despite the fact that both the Melbourne Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians (produced by the Australian Education Ministers, 2008) and the ACARA (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority) General Capabilities (the curriculum for all Australian schools) clearly provide mandatory frameworks for principals and teachers to adopt in their schools. These documents summarise many different social skills' capabilities that all classrooms are meant to be promoting and teaching. This study investigates whether social skills are being taught or promoted to the requirements of these legal documents.

In this chapter, the following sections will be explored: history and context for the study, the theoretical framework and the main theorists influencing the researcher and study, Constructivists and Cognitivists.

## 2.2 History and context

Education is an important concern of most people, especially if they have children. Perhaps as a result of recent political and community discussion, continued family breakdown, poor academic performance in schools and destructive behaviours in communities, there has been an increase in numbers of case studies and reports on 'connectedness' in schools in the past few decades. Social connectedness can refer to "the relationships people have with others and the benefits these relationships bring to the individual" (Ministry of Social Development, NZ, The Social Report 2010, p. 110). There have been many empirical studies supporting the notion that social skills are linked to positive academic outcomes for students (Maroulis et al. 2008, p. 1902). For example Bernard (1993), Dewey (1922, 2009) and Vygotsky (1968) among others, propose that time spent on social skills should be equal to that spent on core subjects, like English and Maths. Past findings by renowned psychologist Jean Piaget (1965) showed that interaction between learners in contexts such as group work and discussions are important for socialisation; however, such interactions are also extremely important for liberating individuals from their egocentrism, resulting in improved cognitive growth (McInerney et al. 1994, p. 94). Perhaps, as in most things, students need to have a balance with regard to what they focus on academically, physically and socially.

Contemporary research findings by Yen et al. (2004) indicate that 'academic enablers', including motivation, social skills and persistence, have a distinctive and exclusive connection with achievement beyond cognitive ability and academic outcomes (p. 157-169). The research mentioned so far from educational experts supports the contention that social skills improve academic performance. Teachers know that if students are performing well academically, they are usually feeling comfortable and safe in the learning environment and have a good friend or group of friends with whom they can communicate. In both Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories on enhancing learning, there is great emphasis on the importance of social skills and learning experiences for students (McInerney et al. 1994, p. 103). Further research into the effects of social connectedness and its impact on performance is important in encouraging educational organisations to facilitate the most productive learning environments possible for their students and thus to enable learners of the future to achieve their best.

## 2.3 Theoretical framework

The main part of this study involves the researcher investigating and analysing the question of whether or not social skills affect learning. Therefore, in this section, the central theoretical tenets and ideas that were used to understand the phenomena being studied will be detailed.

The researcher sees learning as sharing knowledge and ideas, and problem solving together. Students can discuss and bounce ideas off their teacher and learn to problem solve or produce higher order thinking. Theories and research on learning were analysed, looking at the problem from both a Constructivist (Bruner, 1996, 1999; Piaget, 1965; Rogers, 1951; Vygotsky, 1962, 1978) and Cognitivist (Bandura, 1961; Goleman, 1995, 1999, 2008, 2011, 2014) perspective. This has helped me to understand how social skills allow relationships and sharing of knowledge between student and teacher; enhancing learning. The theoretical framework and theories that will underpin this research are drawn largely from Vygotsky (1978) and Goleman (2014), who have carried out comprehensive investigations into learning and social skills theories and practices, which have supported social development in learning and the importance of relationships.

Two key educational theorists, Lev Vygotsky and Daniel Goleman, will be reviewed and their theories and ideas dissected. Towards the end, these two experts' possible weaknesses will be highlighted. Later in this chapter, some additional experts' theories will be evaluated to compare with the main experts.

The theoretical underpinnings and framework of this research rest on two main theories concerned with the development of social skills in relation to learning and cognition in general. These are Goleman's notion of Social and Emotional Learning and Vygotsky's Development Theory. I believe these theories are important social theories, which are similar and overlap in many areas. Broadly, I see the above as involving an individual working towards fitting in, and feeling as if they do fit in, in the place where they are learning or working, thus experiencing a sense of belonging in his or her community.

My research is aimed at identifying if and how the development of social skills assists in the attainment of learning and academic performance.

### 2.3.1 Constructivism: from Vygotsky to Rogers

In the education field, there are theorists who promote the social aspects of learning and others who do not believe there is a need for such a focus in learning. Constructivism is a theory that fosters the role of social connection for students in building knowledge and understanding and making sense of information (so theorists who believe in such ideas are called 'Constructivists'). This approach has a principal goal: facilitating students in learning "how to learn", which supports critical thinking and creates learners who are more motivated and independent (Kalpana, 2014). The constructivists helped me understand and view this study's problem and research area; they gave me the lens to view the findings for the research questions. Below is a guide to the two key theorists for this study, Lev Vygotsky and Daniel Goleman, who have contributed greatly to the debate and increased the focus on the social aspect of learning. Other major theorists with similar views are also considered.

Lev Vygotsky, a famous Russian psychologist (1896-1934), was the founder of an original holistic theory of human development involving sociocultural learning, commonly referred to as cultural-historical psychology. He believed that development was the result of individuals interacting with their environment, but he placed even greater emphasis on social interaction and the cultural environment. As such, the researcher will be drawing heavily on the work of Vygotsky. A Soviet psychologist with constructivist ideals, he was convinced that social interaction plays a fundamental role in learning. He believed that all features of a child's development appear first on the social level in interactions with others, and then on the individual level, inside the child. Through interacting with others, children develop effective learning strategies, which are first apparent externally through peer interaction, and later become internalised. Since Vygotsky supposed that an individual's learning firstly happens on an interpersonal level through communication and discussion with other individuals, the dialogue that occurs not only between students, but also between the students and teacher, must have a deep effect on an individual's development and, thus, on their learning.

Overall, Vygotsky's ideas challenge behavioural and individualistic theories in relation to social and emotional learning by presenting a unified and deeply social view of learning. Vygotsky's work consistently claimed that learning occurred in a broad range of educational environments; for example, with caregivers, with educators in formal and informal contexts, and with peers - to stimulate social, cognitive, and emotional development through learning. As well as providing traditional content, Vygotsky emphasised the ability of schooling to

cultivate the development of learners with social, cognitive and emotional capabilities as well as with character traits that focused on ethical awareness. He also proposed a major aim for educational settings: to mould students into worldly and globally aware individuals with a social conscience. For this goal to be realised, the social dynamics of the school had to be the core focus in all educational processes (Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013).

Basically, Vygotsky's constructivist view of learning argues that knowledge is socially constructed. The constructivist approach is grounded on the principle that, by reflecting on and sharing our experiences, we build our own understanding and view of the world in which we exist, then individuals use the mental constructs developed in this fashion to make sense of their experiences. Vygotsky held the view that social interactions form a crucial part of any learning. To be more precise, people learn from one another, absorbing knowledge from one another, not only in isolation from others. This theory is often referred to as 'sociocultural learning'. Vygotsky's "…sociocultural learning involves learning, thinking and knowing as relations among people in activity, with, and arising from the socially and culturally structured world" (Lave, 1991, p. 62).

As children grow up, they move through different stages of development and have many experiences with learning new concepts. It is a constant and rapid absorption of new information, of social situations to analyse and respond to, which continue throughout life due to inevitable changes in homes and in the workforce. Children, teenagers and adults learn and develop by communicating with caregivers, educators and peers, by exploring experiences through collaborative experiments, or basically trying to get along with others. They are provided with assistance from adults who introduce them to a specific group of minds with which they become familiar, to which they adjust, and with which they develop understanding in a cohesive psychological structure using key cognitive skills such as perception, attention, memory, and thinking (Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013).

The classroom atmosphere and climate is crucial to encouraging and supporting the learning that can take place. The teacher's role is to encourage and develop a positive, safe and educational place for all the students. The social relationships between teacher and student, and students and peers, rely heavily upon classroom dynamics. These social environments can either enhance or impede the possibilities for learning within a room. Part of any form of learning is having the confidence to participate, share knowledge and experience, make mistakes and be part of the experience. Learners will only 'put themselves out there' if they

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believe their classroom environment offers acceptance, trust and respect. For effective learning to occur, it is necessary for the teacher to help students feel safe in expressing themselves and in learning from their errors, and for the classroom to foster social cohesion (Sousa, 2010).

The researcher believes that there are some weaknesses with Vygotsky's theories: (1) he believed that language must be acquired before thought; however, I agree with many other psychologists that language and thought develop on parallel pathways; (2) Vygotsky does not refer to stages of cognitive development; instead he indicates a view that learners function and think in similar ways throughout their lives. For example, there is no mention of how brain maturation during the early years may alter the ability of children to think in more advanced ways. There are qualitative differences between the thinking of young children, adolescents, teenagers and adults. (3) Vygotsky's theories are often broad and are not fully detailed (he died at age 37, without the time to justify or prove his theories). The researcher will therefore develop Vygotsky's theories using ideas from other psychologists' or theorists' research.

Vygotsky was known to be critical of school environments. He wrote that schools "should not be understood as simply consisting in a crowd of children who have nothing to do with one another" (1987, p. 237). As an alternative, Vygotsky argued that schools need to produce environments:

- Where relationships between teachers and students that support the study and investigation of gathered knowledge of human cultures are encouraged;

- Where syllabuses link practical, relevant concepts with abstract intellectual concepts that offer divergent viewpoints of and experiences in the world;

- Where students' backgrounds and knowledge base are the starting points for genuine educational tasks including regular assessment *for* learning; and

- Where teaching leads to the cultural growth of all children, including those with biological learning differences.

### 2.3.1.1 Other Prominent Constructivists

One such theorist is Carl Rogers, an American psychologist and one of the most influential founders of the humanistic approach to education from a psychological methodology. His theory of 'self-actualisation' influenced education by encouraging teachers and educational leaders to implement curriculum that allowed for student development and participation. According to Rogers (1951), "The organism has one basic tendency and striving - to actualize, maintain, and enhance the experiencing organism" (p. 487). He stressed that major components of learning need to be a healthy development of one's self, consideration of what one should be, and the skills of interacting with others ( Kirschenbaum & Jourdan, 1989). Like Vygotsky, he emphasised that, for a person to develop, they need an environment that produces interactions leading to the development of genuineness, acceptance and empathy. If these are not developed, relationships and healthy personalities cannot be formed properly (Patterson, 1977).

Jerome Bruner is an American psychologist who, influenced by Vygotsky, believes a child's environment plays a major part in their learning, especially the social environment. He developed a particular notion of inquiry-based, constructivist learning that occurs in problem-solving situations involving the learner drawing on his or her own past experience and existing knowledge to discover information, relationships among ideas, and new ideas. Students remember concepts and knowledge discovered on their own, but are more likely to do so with help from an adult through the process of scaffolding (Bruner, 1996). The concept of scaffolding comes from Vygotsky and is an essential aspect of his notion of the zone of proximal development.

More recently, educational research has focused on young people who are resilient in the face of adversity. Australian clinical psychologist Andrew Fuller, an advocate for teaching children life skills, defines resilience as "the happy knack of being able to bungy-jump through the pitfalls of life. Even when hardship and adversity arise, it is as if the person has an elasticised rope around them that helps them to rebound when things get low and to maintain their sense of who they are as a person" (Fuller, 1998, p. 75). Several researchers have concluded that there are shared qualities amongst those individuals who are able to 'bungy-jump' past their pitfalls and continue flourishing or developing. Humans are naturally fascinated with their social environment; we observe differences; we direct our learning towards social situations and emotions; and we want to find meaning and test our new

knowledge in new surroundings. Primary and secondary schools often deal with major social issues, bullying and special needs issues (students who, due to their specific medical, learning or developmental complexities, have extra requirements to learn at the level of their peers). Thus, it seems logical to develop and implement social skills programs that include social skills, support programs and building resilience in children. According to Fuller, an adolescent's brain is constructed for social and emotional learning. Their bodies contain hormones that become increasingly powerful as they grow, while the brain demonstrates more activity in its emotional centre (the limbic system) than in its planning and impulse control centres (frontal lobes and prefrontal cortex). This suggests that students' learning is at its optimal level when students are actively involved in learning which stimulates emotions. Many experts believe that the brain develops best when free to play and experiment, make choices, and to persist (Fuller, 2006).

There is a plethora of research, theories and evidence from experts in the educational field showing that social skills do impact upon learning; however, there are several educational practices that are antithetical to this theory and which are implemented to encourage improved learning. These will be described in the next section.

Conversely, there has been a compelling case made against the constructivist theory of learning by Vygotsky and Goleman and others promoting social skills in learning. A further case emanated from an American educationalist, as described below.

### 2.3.2 Cognitivism: from Goleman to Bandura

A second group of theorists who also see learning not just as absorbing content is the 'Cognitivists'. They see social and emotional skills and cognitive awareness as an important part of learning. This group of theorists has also facilitated me to comprehend and interpret the problem in this study and they gave you the platform to analyse the learning area. The second key theorist on which this study focuses is Daniel Goleman. He is a current and prominent author and psychologist, specializing in psychology and brain science. He has developed and popularised the concept of emotional intelligence (EI) which the researcher believes compliments Vygotsky's focus on social interaction and learning while highlighting the emotional aspects of social and cognitive development. The Australian curriculum, which is relatively new, reflects Goleman's ideas, with the development of personal and social

learning being one of the seven general capabilities listed. He is one of the major contributors to that curriculum, being particularly significant in ensuring the inclusion of personal and social learning as a competence or capability in school education (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, ACARA, 2012). Goleman's ideas tell us that we can promote and develop children's emotional and social skills, aiming to ensure that the child accrues both immediate and later benefits in terms of wellbeing, ability and achievements in life.

EI is about having the competence to identify, manage and express the emotions within oneself and others (Goleman, 1995). It is based on learning being heavily linked to one's social experience. Goleman presented the concept of Emotional Intelligence as being captured by four elements:

- Self-awareness
- Self-management
- Social Awareness
- Social Skills (2008, p. 74).

Beginning in the 1980s, EI was a developing research area due to promotion by media in the West, probably because of the contemporaneous self-help movement and focus on learning, and management or leadership practices. Goleman's theory embraces "social and emotional learning" (SEL). This refers to the process of helping learners develop the fundamental skills for life effectiveness (in other words, social skills). Social skills enable the ability to handle our relationships, our work, and ourselves effectively and ethically (Goleman, 2008, p. 8). Goleman views learning as a social wonder produced predominantly via an emotional process. For example, he might ask: how did you feel when you were a child and you answered a question correctly in front of the class? Or, do you remember the time you did your first exam and the incredible amount of pressure you felt? These two learning scenarios would definitely trigger emotional feelings. The researcher would suggest that if you feel little emotion while you were supposed to be learning, then not much learning was happening. If learning is indeed influenced by the social experience of emotions, then it is vital to work out how we can utilise emotions to enhance learning. It is essential that students be assisted to recognise how their "EI" works to improve or hamper their efforts as a learner (Culver, 1998).

According to Goleman, if individuals are unsettled or unhappy and feel disconnected, they experience an unhealthy state of mind and the mind will not perform at a competent level.

Can anyone produce their best efforts in learning if they are experiencing negative feelings, or low self-esteem, and do not want to be where they are? Feeling socially disconnected or being in a poor emotional state restricts the amount of energy one can devote to an activity or to learning. Central to all of these factors at school, university or even in the workplace is emotional intelligence. Unfortunately, correlates of learning like emotional intelligence were not deeply researched and were therefore generally ignored in earlier systems of education (Culver, 1998). At this time, learning methods or strategies encouraged did not include social interaction, let alone consider the role of emotions. To stimulate learning today, students are urged to interact socially and to regulate and be in harmony with their emotions. Credit for this should go in large part to Daniel Goleman. Emotions and social interactions are now viewed as providing the spark or human attributes that trigger passion or interest for learners. They can be shaped and developed in a positive fashion, instead of being viewed as matters carrying a negative stigma and hence being largely ignored (Goleman, 1995).

For a long time it was debated whether the emotional state of our minds plays a significant part in the learning process. This changed when Goleman entered the field. As a result of his propositions, the academic and business worlds have generally now accepted the effect of emotions on learning. Nowadays, it seems to be thought that a socially positive emotional state of mind does help successful learning (Culver, 1998). Prior to Goleman's work, it was commonly believed that an individual's IQ level governed their level of success in learning or education, but, after his book, *Emotional Intelligence*, was released it was recognised that even people with extraordinarily high IQ levels often did not achieve high levels of success if they had not achieved a healthy emotional state of mind.

There is a growing body of research indicating that social skills are a central part of a learner's development. Social skills foster academic growth (Walberg, Bloodworth, Weissberg, & Zins, 2007), positive school environments, and respectful and caring communities, and trains and equips students to be sensible and skilled members of society (Wilson, Gottfredson & Najaka, 2001; Haertel, Walberg & Wang, 1997). Quite recently, in August 2014, Goleman provided us with a new book titled *The Triple Focus (More Than Sound)*. It builds on the platforms already established in previous Goleman concepts, Emotional Intelligence and Social and Emotional Learning. The new book offers educators and leaders a validation for integrating three core skill sets in the classroom: understanding self, understanding the other, and understanding the larger systems within which we operate. Goleman offers a thorough explanation of why these proficiencies are essential in assisting

learners to tackle a non-stop world of endless distraction and rising interconnectedness. Further, Goleman outlines effective methods for introducing the three competencies into schools and gives examples of model educational programs that contain the competencies in their curricula.

Goleman's new area of research outlined in the book, *Understanding The Larger Systems Within Which We Operate (Systems Learning) (2014)*, facilitates students in identifying and understanding their actions in terms of interpersonal dynamics, while urging educators to see their classroom as a system. This theory is likely to generate more strategies in schools to add to social skills, resulting in an advanced perception of the intricacies of relationships and their forms. The desired outcome of Goleman's recent work, *The Triple Focus* (2014), is to see social skills updated and fused with systems learning, giving students tools for regulating themselves, their relationships, and their surroundings. It offers schools a straightforward summary of three core domains of learning that can improve student mastery and inclination to engage. Goleman encourages teachers to see their classroom as a system: to break down the classroom into little sections that come together as one - rather than looking at the classroom as one area and  neglecting vital mechanisms - allowing the teacher to teach more efficiently and the students to learn more effectively. To end, Goleman kindly shares a quarter century of his experience in the field of learning, for schools as administrations. According to Goleman, educating children to comprehend systems dynamics increases their ability to cope with relationship difficulties and thus to sustain healthy relationships of every kind (CASEL 2014).

Goleman's theories also have some weaknesses, however, including: (1) there are researchers such as Barchard (2003), Kristjánsson (2006) and Rietti (2008) who criticise Goleman's theories, revealing concerns with his explanation of the construct and his lack of empirical evidence. (2) Goleman's EI theory involves teaching a system of values which some would say crosses ethical lines and neglects individual differences and backgrounds, including different cultural values. (3) Perhaps the main criticism of EI Theory is the lack of a clear operational definition (Humphrey et al., 2007). Without a clear definition, it is difficult for researchers to produce empirical evidence refuting or supporting EI (Kristjánsson, 2006). As a result, tests designed to measure levels of EI are frequently limited to self-report or other subjective measures, such as the Sullivan Teacher Rating Scale of Emotional Intelligence for Children. As Humphrey et al. states, "These measures clearly fail to account for variables and possible confounds such as self-promotion, positive parent-child interaction and emotional attachment" (2007, p. 243).

### 2.3.2.1 Other Prominent Cognitivists

Albert Bandura is a Canadian psychologist who developed Social Learning Theory. This theory suggested that people learn by interacting with others, observing their behaviour and attitudes, and then observing the outcomes of those behaviours. This theory is strongly linked to the infant and adolescent developmental stages, but can be relevant all the way to adulthood. Bandura (1961) states that most human behaviour is learned by watching others through modelling: from seeing others at play, one creates an idea of how new behaviours are performed, and, when the opportunity arises, this stored information serves as a guide for action. Bandura's theory has often been thought of as the link between behaviourist and cognitive learning theories as it incorporates attention, memory and motivation (associated with Vygotsky's Social Development Theory and Lave's Situated Learning).


### 2.4 Conclusion

From the completed research on social skills, the five things presented in this chapter included: in the History and Context section it was noted that Vygotsky and Goleman's theories are generally acknowledged in education and in the professional social skills' programs available today. In the Theoretical Framework section, the structure and tools for investigating the questions for this study were explained. A section on the Constructivists who have worked on the topic of social skills and learning was detailed and another section on Cognitivists who have also completed studies on the same topic was described. In this chapter, the researcher laid out the phenomena, focusing on Constructivists and Cognitivists. There is an understanding forming that social skills are important for learning in schools (Bernard, 2006, 2011; Zyngier, 2003, 2014), also, that some schools implement their theories well and others poorly or not at all.

The stage has been set for an exploration into social skills and learning. The basis for the research has been described and the remaining chapters will guide you through the other key elements remaining in this study.

# CHAPTER THREE: PROCEDURE & METHODOLOGY

## 3.1 Introduction

Chapter One identified the research problem in the context of social skills and learning in the educational setting. In Chapter Two the study was framed within the landscape of social skills and learning according to past and recent evidence in literature and educational theories. This led to the formulation of the research questions, which this study will address in the findings and discussion in Chapter Four. This chapter will present the procedures and methodology used in this study. All research ventures are uniquely different in one way or another, and this study is no different. Thus, there will be aspects of the methodology of this study which feature personal design, adaptations and modifications arising from relevant practical considerations.

## 3.2 Research approaches

When undertaking research there are a variety of methods you can follow. According to Lincoln and Guba (1998), methodology is concerned with the research approaches, strategies and skills suitable for collecting valid evidence. It deals with the methods, guidelines and conduct of inquiry. The methodology for this review of literature was that of a systematic review (EPPI, 2007; Harden & Thomas, 2008), involving a comprehensive and systematic approach by using expert research, theories and articles as the primary method to develop an enhanced understanding of the research topic in addition to specifying a need for this research. As with all literature reviews, the main goal of a systematic review is to analyse as many relevant research papers on a selected topic as possible, but also include a methodology section that clearly specifies selection criteria and search procedures (EPPI, 2015).

I will not complete any empirical research; therefore, there are no ethics issues. I will draw from the existing literature and build on this by providing a new way of looking at the issue of social development and learning. I have started and will continue a systematic review of the literature, looking through specific data and resources, and researching particular theorists and comparing works from various sources. There is already a wealth of literature about the relationship between social skills and learning and this research project will provide a much-needed critical review of that literature. I will outline and defend my own opinion about the existing literature and positions on the relationship between learning and social skills. The

fundamental goal is to use existing literature and research to analyse social skills and learning and if it is positive or negative in learning. The thesis must show a consistent and cohesive theme. Employing the methodology of systematic review, while based on the qualitative approach focusing on social skills in the educational world is proposed, using scholarly journals or expert theories as the primary outlet for information for my article. The study aims to present a holistic overview of social skills and learning.

### 3.2.1 Systematic literature review (SLR)

A literature review is a valuable piece of research as it offers interested readers a broad and constructive appraisal of the professional publications available on a selected topic. In this chapter, the second section discusses links between social skills, learning and performance. The third section details current social skills research. There is recent neuroscientific research involving social skills which is discussed in the fourth section. A concept map is then provided, visually highlighting the key theorists for this study and their related theories. The conceptual/theoretical frameworks of the main experts on social skills in education are described in the following section. The major sections remaining include research revealing why social skills are important for learning, then literature on school curriculum and practices that hinder or ignore the teaching of social skills - and, conversely, research on programs and pedagogy that foster the development of social skills.

This study is endeavouring to analyse learning, and whether or not social skills affects learning. Firstly, from the researcher's viewpoint, it is important for more studies to be completed in the field of social skills and students' learning, predominantly because there seems to be an increase in the numbers of children who are struggling socially, who have poor self-esteem, and who do not get time spent with them at home, generally feeling uncomfortable at school as a result. This affects their academic performance and attendance. Secondly, a majority of the contemporary research in this area uses teenagers in their sample groups. This data surely cannot be a valid reflection of the circumstances of age groups before adolescence - for example, early childhood or middle childhood. Finally, schools need to be made accountable for the climate within their learning environments, as it can determine their students' motivation, feelings of connectedness, productivity and results. Schools and other organisations always focus primarily on the output at the end of the day, usually ignoring the input, which is often the source of poor results. But knowledgeable and experienced educators

will tell you it is actually more important to establish quality input to ensure the consequent output (or student productivity) will be the best it can be. "The goal is to keep all students engaged and participating because only the person who thinks, learns" (Sousa, 2010, p. 56).

**3.2.2 Selection of research articles/criteria (inclusion/exclusion)**

The methodology for this review of literature was that of a systematic review (EPPI, 2007; Thomas & Harden, 2008), involving a comprehensive and systematic approach by using expert research, theories and articles as the primary method to develop an enhanced understanding of the research topic in addition to specifying a need for my research. As with all literature reviews, the main goal is to collect as many relevant research papers on a selected topic as possible, but also include a methodological section that clearly specifies selection criteria and search procedures (EPPI, 2015).

The below steps were implemented to guarantee that the review was systematic (as suggested by EPPI-Centre (2007):

1. Scoping the review: In order to select the papers, clear criteria have been developed for identifying which research would be involved in the review.

*Inclusion criteria for the review (Table 1)*

| Criterion | Inclusion Criteria |
|---|---|
| Topic | Papers/literature needs to relate explicitly to each or at least one of the research questions in this study (contexts of social skills, learning, education) |
| Recency | Papers/literature selected should have been published from 2000 onwards (however, there must be papers/literature before 2000 that is of specific relevance to the aims of this study that can be selected) |
| Age-range | Papers/literature needs to be focused on school-age learners, unless focus is general school students (5-12) |
| Geographical spread | Papers/literature can relate to research in any country |

| Research base | Papers/literature needs to be empirical research – qualitative or quantitative. There can be exceptions based on limitedness of literature. |
|---|---|
| Transparency | The methodology of the study needs to be clear (for example, analysis, sample sizes). |
| Reliability/validity | Depending on the study, the results or findings upon which the literature is based must be valid and reliable. |

2.  Searching for studies: I have endeavoured to identify and analyse applicable research in specific types of literature (see Table 2) by inserting a pre-determined and consistent set of search terms. Papers/literature found using a range of databases are documented in a table with summary statements along each selection criteria.

*Sourcing papers/literature (Table 2)*

| Type of Literature | Method of locating paper/literature |
|---|---|
| World Wide Web | Google, Google Scholar, |
| Journals | EduSearch, ACEReSearch, ERIC, A+Education, ProQuest Education Journals. Searching *learning, learning in the classroom, social skills in schools, best way to learn.* |
| Official reports | EduSearch, ACEReSearch, ERIC, A+Education, ProQuest Education Journals. Searching |
| Theses | EduSearch, ACEReSearch, ERIC, A+Education, visiting libraries. Searching *learning, learning in the classroom, social skills in schools, best way to learn.* |
| Doctorates | EduSearch, ACEReSearch, ERIC, A+Education, visiting libraries. Searching *learning, learning in the classroom, social skills in schools, best way to learn.* |

| Books | EduSearch, ACEReSearch, ERIC, A+Education, visiting libraries. Searching *learning, learning in the classroom, social skills in schools, best way to learn.* |
|---|---|

3. Screening papers: All papers/literature has to be assessed against the inclusion criteria. This assists in avoiding hidden bias, by having explicit and consistent guidelines on which papers/literature are being used to answer the research questions for this study, using the same criteria when assessing each paper/literature and noting the outcomes, allows the foundation for the review's conclusions to be transparent. However, it is important to note that on occasions where there is inadequate evidence related to the research questions, selection criteria does not apply to such papers/literature (an exception to the rule).

4. Describing and mapping: The methodology and findings will be briefly explained from each included paper/literature, as well as variables, for example, study design, population focus and significant characteristics linked to the research questions.

5. Quality and relevance appraisal: All the papers/literature are put into appraisal in terms of:

- The appropriateness of that use of the study design for tackling their actual research question(s) (relevance).
- The trustworthiness of the results evaluated by the quality of the study within the agreed rules for undertaking the particular type of research design used in the study (quality).
- The appropriateness of focus of the research for answering the review question(s) (topic relevance).
- Judgement of overall weight of evidence (WoE) (Gough, 2007) based on the assessments made for each of the above criteria (see Table 3).

*Criteria for judging "weight of evidence" (Table 3)*

| Level/criterion | Methodological quality | Methodological relevance | Topic relevance |
|---|---|---|---|

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Excellent | Excellent research design justifying all decisions taken, e.g. sample, instruments, analysis. Clear evidence of measures taken to maximise validity and reliability. | Research question(s) clearly stated. Methodology is highly relevant to research questions and answers them in detail. | Paper/literature is closely aligned to one of the review questions and provides very strong evidence upon which to base future policy/action. |
| 2. Good | Research design clearly stated with evidence of sensible decisions taken to provide valid and reliable findings. | Research question(s) are clear or can be deduced from text. Findings address research question(s) | Paper/literature is broadly in line with one of the review questions and provides useful evidence. |
| 3. Satisfactory | Research design may be explicit but appears sensible and likely to yield useful data. | Research question(s) implicit but appear to be broadly matched by research design and findings. | At least part of the paper/literature findings is relevant to one of the review questions. |
| 4. Inadequate | Research design not stated and contains flaws. | Research question(s) not stated or not matched by design. | Paper/literature |

6. Synthesising paper/literature findings: In order to effectively synthesise my study findings, I will follow the approach of Narrative Empirical Synthesis (EPPI-Centre, 2007). This process is a proven method to bring together the results of the mapping activity to enable an accessible combination of results from individual studies in structured summaries. This includes taking the summaries of research methodology and findings from the mapping activity and putting them together under thematic headings, as narrative paragraphs summarising the major points and their relative evidence bases. In situations when there are findings for which there are fewer studies, or studies with lower WoE, they are classified as 'reasonable evidence'. Any findings suggested by eminent researchers in the field and findings that are exceptionally selected are described as 'exceptional' evidence.

7. Conclusions/recommendations: To make transparent the foundation on which each recommendation is generated, a series of recommendations has been developed and closely linked to the findings of the synthesis. This comprises the identification of possible limitations in the generalisability or transferability of findings.

To gather further data for this study, an interview with a local expert was completed. The setting for this was originally one-to one in the expert's office. However, due to the expert and the researcher being busy and available dates not coinciding, it was done on the phone. This was not the best method, but it was the only avenue. The expert and the researcher were both situated at their own office at night. The interview was recorded on an iPad, so it could be replayed, made into a transcript and analysed.

### 3.2.3 Interview

An interview with a local educational expert was carried out for this thesis to explore this study's research questions by adding local expert opinion on the place of social skills in learning. He has published extensively on education and has often provided his insights to the media. The expert is a Senior Lecturer in Curriculum and Pedagogy, member of the Editorial Board of Teaching and Teacher Education (Elsevier), author of educational research papers, Creative Education member, an expert commentator for the Australian Council of Education Leaders (ACEL), and a Garth Boomer Award winner for his contribution to education in Australia. Since this paper focused predominantly on two experts from Europe and the US, the researcher wanted to include an Australian perspective and, more specifically, delve into the Melbourne education scene. There have been no additional interviews as this study is a theoretical review of the main experts who have had a key impact in the field of social skills recently and in the past.

### 3.3 Interview study design

In December 2013, the researcher interviewed a local educational expert. He was given a copy of the questions prior to the interview. Due to logistical and personal circumstances, the process was completed via telephone. The expert was told he had the right to answer or not answer questions and could stop the interview at any time. The interview questions consisted

of 14 open-ended questions that were designed to reflect on the literature presented in Chapter Two. By the end of the interview, the expert had answered all of the questions. The recorded answers have been analysed and included in the thesis in Chapter Four and where relevant throughout the thesis. Each question is listed below beside its accompanying educational concept and its related researcher. It should be mentioned that while these questions were framed to gain an insight into the expert's knowledge, beliefs and thoughts, they became a platform for further questions because of their open nature.

I believed it was important to include a local expert in this study to ensure a current and local perspective, an expert opinion from the Australasian part of the world. The majority of the information and theory in this study is from Europe or the U.S. The local expert, who has written extensively on social skills in education, fortunately is working at the university where the researcher is studying. The interview comments from the expert are simply intended to support the ideas and theories presented by the two main experts being investigated in this study, Vygotsky and Goleman. There was therefore only one interview conducted. The use of interviews is worthwhile as their open-endedness allows for expansive thinking of the interviewee, giving researchers access to more and often better information compared to other methods.

## 3.4 Timeline

It is important to have an appropriate and achievable timeline to achieve any form of extended writing. The timeline for this study is only an estimate and will no doubt change as the process is completed systematically. Below is a table showing the timeline for the research:

| Date | Work undertaken by researcher |
|---|---|
| 2012  January to June | Search/study readings, begin Literature Review and liaise with supervisor |
| July to December | Search/study readings, Thesis Proposal, begin thesis, First thesis draft and liaise with supervisor |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2013  January to June | Search/study readings, complete proposal, start thesis and liaise with supervisor |
| July to December | Search/complete readings, continue thesis, complete data activity by performing interview with a local expert and liaise with supervisor |
| 2014  January to June | Search/complete readings, continue thesis, analyse interview with the local expert and liaise with supervisor |
| July to December | Search/complete readings, finalise thesis and liaise with supervisor |
| 2015 to 2017  January to July | Time off, personal/work reasons |
| 2017 to 2018  August to March | Continue finalising thesis and proofreading; submission |

## 3.5 Conclusion

This chapter contained the overall procedures and methodology for the research and how information was sourced, analysed and synthesised. So you can understand now that this study is not your usual thesis, often quantitative. This is a systematic literature review on social skills and learning, a current and important topic. The next chapter will present the findings and discussion that are derived from the analysis, address the problem statement and research questions, and fulfil the purpose of the thesis.

<center>**CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**</center>

## 4.1 Introduction

The research so far has outlined the study and revealed a plethora of information on social skills and learning. It is time to move on and get to the point of this exploration. This chapter aims to re-examine and answer the research questions and conclude by discussing the possible answers to the research questions.

## 4.2 Findings and discussion

In this section, the research questions will be re-visited with the stated findings based on an analysis of the data (pertinent research studies and interview data) for each detailed and discuss the ramifications.

### 4.2.1 Finding 1: Social skills (their presence or absence) do affect learning

After systematically analysing the research articles and interview, and focusing on the research question, "Do social skills affect learning?" - it was found that social skills and learning work together hand in hand (Bernard, 2006, 2011; Zyngier, 2003, 2014). Analysing more readings, I found a link between of studies and experts. From the research analysed, the common thread is that social skills do have a positive influence on a person's learning. "Educational leaders, teachers, school counselors, social workers and school psychologist have long argued that some students were underperforming academically because they lack proper social skills (inattentiveness and unprepared during instructional periods, aggressive behavior toward classmates and educational staff, inability to engage cooperative learning and disruptive behavior in classroom) which affected their academic skills" (Eleby, 2009, p. 6).

In a majority (70%) of the studies analysed, there was a consistent pattern showing constructivists believe social skills enhance learning, social constructivism emphasises the importance of culture (60 out of 85 studies analysed). The articles read were all consistent with their studies and message that learning is enhanced by social skills. The readings appeared to say Constructivists view learning as a social process, it does not take place within an individual alone. Meaningful learning occurs when individuals are engaged in social activities (Morales, 2008, p. 155). My analyses of the data seem to indicate that a majority of the research conducted by the cognitivist researchers in my SLR (systematic literature review)

hold that learning is a social task influenced by one's state of mind which is dependant on the learner socially fitting in with the environment they are learning in. If the learner feels comfortable, is interacting happily, and their emotional state is positive, they will be productive in the learning process. Social and emotional factors can increase learning, they encompasses the process through which children and young people acquire knowledge, attitudes and skills (Durlak & Weissburg, 2011, p.407).

Evidence from three comprehensive reviews on the effectiveness of social skills programs revealed that social skills are an effective method for developing a range of positive student outcomes (Payton et al., 2008). The students involved were from elementary to middle school. Overall, there were 317 studies and 324,303 children in the study. Schools that implemented social skills programs, that is, programs that try to encourage various social skills, produced multiple benefits in each follow up review and were effective for children with and without behavioural and emotional problems. The social skills programs increased students' social-emotional skills, attitudes about self and others, connection to school, positive social behaviour and academic performance; as well as reducing students' behaviour problems and distress. The programs improved academic performance by 11 to 17 percentile points across the three reviews. In other completed research around learning, it was found that there is a link between social skills and academic performance. Social skills and academic competence influenced each other regularly over time, a pattern where academic competence casually influenced social competence, which in turn informally influenced academic competence (Parke, et. al. 1998).

The systematic analyses of the literature revealed that social skills do affect learning. Research from the past conducted many studies connecting social skills with effective learning (Bandura, 1961; Rogers, 1951). Then, experts in the education field highlighted the need for social interaction in the classroom (Erickson, 1963; Vygotsky,1978). Data showing that social skills and learning from your peers increased academic performance was shared in education circles (Dahl, 1984; Garmezy, 1983). More recently, many experts have completed research revealing a connection between developing social skills and learning together to enhance overall learning (Fuller, 2001; Zyngier, 2003, 2014). These theorists consistently discuss the need for building relationships and interacting with peers for genuine learning to take place as, students often learn from their peers as much as they do their teacher.

Not only do most of the researchers whose work I analysed show this connection between social skills and learning, but also the expert who was interviewed clearly expressed the importance of a student's social skills on their learning: "We are social beings and we learn through watching others, being told by others, being shown by others and of course we also can teach others by demonstrating, by mentoring, and by giving feedback." Additionally, Piaget believed that children shaped their own understandings of reality via endless interaction with their environment. Piaget (1965) stated that "peer relationships are crucial to the child's development of social and moral feelings, values, and social and intellectual competence" (p. 67). This appears to be in sync with the empirical work of Cognitivists Bernard (2006, 2011) and Goleman (2008, 2011) - according to Goleman (1999, p. 23), "I make the case that human abilities like social skills matter enormously in life and should be taught in school". What he means here is that social skills are important in the early part of life and need to be consolidated so they can be lifelong skills. Durlak, Schellinger and Weissberg (2011) completed a meta-analysis of 213 schools involving 270, 034 students in America, investigating the impact of social skills on learning. They focused on universal school-based social-emotional development program studies and used suitable search strategies for a literature search. These included a systematic, unbiased, representative sample of published and unpublished studies to analyse. This investigation indicated that compared to controls, students with effective social skills (having the social skills to positively interact with others and build relationships) reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in academic achievement. Other methodological scoring variables included: 'social skills' drawn from Elliott and Gresham's Social Skills Rating Scale; 'conduct problems' which involved different types of behavioural problems ratings via the Child Behaviour Checklist and teacher ratings; 'emotional distress' rated by reports of mental health issues by students, teachers and parents; and 'academic performance' scores from standardised tests and school grades (Durlak, Schellinger & Weissberg, 2011). So considering all of the research saying that social skills do affect learning, it seems learning can be increased by implementing a focus on social skills into classrooms.  The above data and arguments in this paragraph link learning with social skills.

Pearson (2005) completed a study investigating the relationship between social skills, learning and academic achievement. The participants in the research activity included 72 students who attended 1st and 2nd grade and their teachers in an elementary school in Baltimore, America. Each teacher completed a Social Skills section of the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS) and

the Learning Behaviour Scale. Each student was tested on the Otis-Lennon School Ability Test- 8 (OLSAT-8), and his or her achievement scores from the Stanford Achievement Test-10 (Stanford 10) were accessed. The resulting model comparison revealed that school ability and learning behaviors both have significant direct effects on academic achievement. Additionally, school ability and social skills were found to have significant direct effects on learning behaviors.

So the research undertaken into learning resulted in a connection between Constructivists and Cognitivists. The main links being:

- Constructivists believe in fostering the role of social connection for students in building knowledge and understanding and making sense of information/ individuals interacting with their environment, but place even greater emphasis on social interaction and the cultural environment (McMahon, 1997).
- Cognitivists see learning as a social and emotional activity involving thinking from inside (Jacobson, 2004).

In connecting this main finding to the larger literature, it was found that most researchers agree that social skills do affect learning but in most countries there is not a strong focus on social skills (Goleman, 2014; McClelland et al. 2007, Vygotsky, 1978). Although, I think in many Indigenous communities, there are still the traditional teachings of family and relationships– perhaps a good subject for another thesis!

In 2006 Ray and Elliott tested whether a student's self-concept, social skills and social support affected academic achievement. The participants varied in race, sex and grade level in trying to explain the findings, Parke, et. al. (1998), proposed that the behavioural pattern and skills that the learner brings to the educational setting are likely to carry over to the classroom learning environment. Secondly, the student's ability to focus and direct its attention during classroom instruction, while this varies from student to student, influences the student's cognitive ability and interaction. A third explanation can be related to the interpersonal relationship between the teacher and child (Parke, et. al 1998). While the Dahl 1984; Frydenberg 1999 and Zyngier, 2003, 2014 studies were in agreement with the larger literature base, that social skills affect learning, it was not as in sync with the Hirsch's (1987 and 1996) work, that subject content is the main ingredient in learning. We might want to consider that while many of the studies provided us with lots of relevant research and information– most of the studies were from America. Therefore, the samples are not from our native country,

Australia. This could reduce in a small way the relevance of the data provided. However, the expert interviewee and a small number of the studies were from Australia.

**4.2.2 Finding 2: Social skills can positively affect learning**

The second finding as a result of investigating and asking the question, "If social skills do affect learning, is it in a negative or positive way?" was that there is a positive link saying that social skills do affect learning (Belcastro & Boon, 2012; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012). In the research that has been completed, the information analysed clearly advised that social skills have a constructive effect on learning. In addition, a study (McClelland et al., 2007) discovered that children who had trouble using learning-related skills or social skills to carry out goal-directed activities scored lower on a standardized cognitive achievement measure. A further investigation highlighted that improvements in learning-related skills and social skills, mainly self-regulation, forecast gains in early literacy, vocabulary, and maths skills (McClelland et al., 2007). Overall, studies strongly indicate that social skills (interpersonal skills and learning-related skills) are important for academic success and social wellbeing from early childhood through to adulthood.

A review of studies of school students in America by Walker and Severson (2002) showed students who possess social skills are more likely to have positive educational outcomes including successful school adjustment in the form of positive relationships with teachers and peers, academic achievement, low rates of disciplinary contact (Walker & Severson, 2002). For the  review, Walker and Severson conducted their analyses using a meta-analytic approach, which summarised in a quantitative fashion the overall impact of interventions across studies. Studies eligible for inclusion in these reviews had to emphasise the development of one or more general social skills, target students between the ages of 5 and 13, include a control group, and report information for calculating effect sizes (ESs). For each review, they systematically examined published and unpublished literature sources to obtain a representative non-biased sample of investigations. One response from the expert from the interview undertaken included, "…from the very, very earliest time, social skills are incredibly important for the learning process…and again the teacher needs to model that in his or her classroom and to model the appropriate activity and that's a social skill and the children see that modelling taking place…from their peers and from the teacher and they learn the appropriate good behaviours and social skills behaviours…as required to facilitate their learning."

Dymnicki (2006) comprehensively analyzed a small subset of the studies looking into the effects of social skills and students' grades or performance on achievement tests. Consistent with Kristjánsson's (2006) prediction that the effects would be positive, student success was defined in broad terms, including school attitudes, school behaviors, and performance, which made the evaluation of programs more meaningful. In particular, Dymnicki observed to what extent social skills influenced positive behavior, attitudes towards school, school disciplinary reactions, school attendance, grades, and achievement tests. For this subset of 43 studies, preliminary findings again supported Kristjánsson's extrapolations: social skills considerably improved students' school functioning in all of these areas.

In a meta-analysis of studies of programs to promote social skill development of children, researchers found multiple benefits for youth, including improved personal and social skills, increased academic performance and reduced problem behaviours (CASEL, 2008). For this study, the CASEL researchers analysed 700 studies on a wide range of school-based programs aimed at increasing students' social skills. Some of the programs included, for example, character education lessons, anti-bullying efforts, drug-abuse prevention programs, or conflict-resolution training. Pre- and post-surveys involving the students and teachers, and standardised testing, were incorporated. Out of all of the information gained, the researchers culled 207 studies that met their criteria for inclusion in the analysis. The studies had to involve typical students aged 5 to 18, and use a control group of students, so that any gains could be compared against those that students might be expected to make under normal circumstances. Just under half the studies also went a step further and randomly assigned students to either the experimental or the comparison group.

There was a study (2009) that investigated the effect of a social and emotional learning skills curriculum, the You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program (YCDI), on the social-emotional development, well-being, and academic achievement of 99 preparatory and grade 1 students attending a Catholic school in Melbourne, Australia. One preparatory and one grade 1 class were randomly chosen to receive structured lessons in YCDI, delivered by their classroom teachers over a period of 10 weeks during Terms 2, 3, and 4, 2009, while the remaining preparatory and grade 1 class served as the control group. The YCDI lessons were devised to teach young children confidence, persistence, organisation and emotional resilience. The educational program consisted of explicit, direct instruction lessons drawn from the YCDI Early Childhood Curriculum taught three times a week, reinforced by a range of additional social and emotional teaching practices.

The data collected from the two questionnaires, as well as the teacher-reported student reading levels, were entered into the statistical package SPSS v.15 for analysis. The WBS was re-coded from a four-point scale to a five-point scale, and any missing data was estimated using the Expectation Maximization (EM) method. Based on the internal consistency and normality of each scale of the WBS and SSRS-T, five variables (scales) were selected for further analysis. Two variables were chosen to measure social-emotional well-being: Positive Social-Emotional Well-being (all items from Part 1 of the WBS) and Total Problem Behaviours (items 31–48 from the SSRS-T). Two variables were chosen to measure social-emotional competence: Total Social-Emotional Competence (all items from Part 2 of the WBS) and Total Social Skills (items 1–30 from the SSRS-T). Reading Level was retained as the measure of academic achievement.

The results of this study indicate that the You Can Do It! Early Childhood Education Program was an effective way of improving the social and emotional competence of young children. Specifically, the students in the study who received YCDI, delivered by their teachers as part of the curriculum, displayed significantly greater gains in their teacher-rated levels of social-emotional competence (measured in terms of items associated with positive self-orientation, positive other-orientation, and positive work-orientation) and social skills (measured in terms of items associated with co-operation, assertion, and self-control) than the students who did not receive the program. Especially at Grade 1, the degree of improvement is substantial and suggests the impact of the YCI program is likely to have practical significance for young children (Ashdown & Bernard, 2012).

Both Constructivists and Cognitivists theorist report the relationship between social skills and learning is positive. According to Constructivists, learning intertwines with social skills as the nature of a learner's social interaction with knowledgeable members of society is important. Without social skills and learning from others it is impossible to acquire learning in most subjects. Young children develop their thinking abilities by interacting with others (Lave, 1991). Cognitivists consider focusing on social skills positive on learning.

The analysis of the data revealed that social skills do positively affecting learning. Clear research outlining the fact that social skills do positively affect learning comes from Dahl, 1984; Erickson, 1963; Garmezy, 1983; Piaget, 1965 and Vygotsky, 1962, 1978. There are more studies that show not only that learning is increased via social skill development; but that social skills also can be a great gauge of how an individual can perform in the workplace and in life in general (Berliner and Amrein, 2002; Phenice & Hines, 2000). Some

contemporary work in the education area (Belcastro & Boon, 2012; Polesel, Dulfer and Turnbull, 2012;) also highlights the impact of social skills on a learner's overall outlook on learning in the classroom and its benefits. Young people's social and emotional development is related to academic performance, and fostering social skills and emotional wellbeing can lead to lots of desirable outcomes (Kristjánsson, 2006). According to Australian Andrew Fuller (2006), an adolescent's brain is constructed for social and emotional learning. Their bodies contain hormones that become increasingly powerful as they grow, while the brain demonstrates more activity in its social and emotional centre (the limbic system) than in its planning and impulse control centres (frontal lobes and prefrontal cortex). This suggests that students' learning is at its optimal level when students are actively involved in learning which stimulates social interaction and emotions.

Many experts believe that the brain develops best when free to play and experiment, make choices, and to persist (Fuller, 2006). From this, it appears that learning should be focused on allowing students to talk, discuss, reflect and learn from each other. Not just relying on the teacher to feed them information.

From reading the above paragraphs involving the research from numerous experts, the majority state that social skills affect learning in a positive way. This notion is in line with the studies from Bandura, 1961 and Vygotsky, 1962, 1978 - Bruner (1999) states, "Students learn effectively by interaction with others and the world, by exploring and manipulating objects, wrestling with questions and talking with others"... From 262 studies, Zins (2004) and colleagues found from kindergarten through high school, social skills had positive influences on numerous outcomes related to academic success. Ostmeyer and Scarpa (2012) undertook a survey of teachers identifying ten social skills considered important to classroom success. If a child exhibits most of these skills they will perform well in the classroom. As a result an environment that fosters social communication can lead to increased academic performance to the child's cognitive ability. The above data and the arguments in this section connect social skills positively with learning.

Learning is impacted upon by social skills in a positive manner, according to Constructivists and Cognitivists. This was clear in all of the literature I read, even from other types of theorists. There was only one theorist, E.D. Hirsch from the US (1987), who was not in line with the Constructivists and Cognitivists theorists. He believes learning should focus solely on core knowledge curriculum as the ideal tool for producing improved academic results. This

perspective neglects the importance of social skills' development. The core curriculum provides educational institutions with predetermined outcomes and subjects, all relying on direct instruction, but offering little room for students' interests, backgrounds, abilities, social or special needs, there being only a small number of subjects, namely English, Maths and sometimes Cultural Studies. Their content is prescribed and there is little space for students' opinions or questioning. The content- heavy nature of this curriculum, which emphasises retention of facts, fosters teacher-centred pedagogies and rote learning, even teaching to the test, reducing the likelihood of teachers using exploratory, collaborative, inquiry-based pedagogies that are more likely to foster social skills. Such a curriculum may leave no opportunity for students to discuss ideas, share learning or interact with each other. Luckily, Hirsch's ideas haven't been implemented at large other than in some small towns in America. Sahlberg (2018) outlined that play (interacting with peers and developing social skills) is seen as the key method of learning in primary and middle school. Even during the short icy days of the Nordic winter, students are forced to have daily outdoor play (Bourke, 2018).

### 4.2.3 Finding 3: There is not enough focus on social skills in schools

The final finding that was made did not relate to a research question but involves the overall realisation that there isn't enough focus on social skills in schools (Goleman, 2014; Vygotsky, 1978; Zyngier, 2003).

Once again, taking into account all the literature and information dissected, there is definitely not a suitable amount of time and resources allocated to planning and developing social skills in the educational environment (Hildebrand & Jacobson, 2004; Kagan & Scott-Little, 2004). The expert interviewed for this study was asked for his opinion on whether schools put a priority on social skills: "No - if they did, then our student outcomes would be superior! And that's clearly one of the big issues that we have; we have enormous variation within schools, not just between schools. So if for example in any one school where the children are basically coming from the same families we have variations within the school because of the understanding of the teacher, the teacher's pedagogical knowledge, and the teacher's content knowledge." Schools that are aware of the importance of, and wish to foster social skills to increase the learning and wellbeing of their students tend to include forward-thinking decision-makers. They have implemented programs which incorporate social skills lessons, emotional intelligence training, recognition of multiple intelligences, inquiry-based learning,

or collaborative group tasks. Such schools know there needs to be a balance between the focus on learning content and producing results, and on building well-rounded, socially competent individuals who can understand the world around them.

Eleby (2009) completed a case study involving a random non-experimental design, spanning across five (5) American states that included eighteen (18) teachers and eighteen (18) students. The researcher used a ten (10) question survey to gather information from thirty-five (35) teachers from seven (7) schools. The students in this study are former students of the selected teachers and have been observed over a period of one to two semesters during the 2007-08 school year. The researcher started communication with the principals and in some situations guidance counselors, of the schools, who then selected the teachers who participated in the study.The data analysis was conducted by a thorough examination of the responses provided by the teachers-participants. The analysis explored the answers to ten questions to see what the teachers-participants believed are important for students to enjoy a successful educational high school experience. The responses shed insights as to the expectations of teachers when they began teaching their content materials to students. The findings included that the:

> implication of this study should encourage educational leaders to make social and academic skills an integrated ingredient of the course syllabus. Educational leaders and administrators should mandate and include social skills instructions in the curriculum for all classes from K-12. Teachers should be mandated to provide social skills instructions to students in their classes and those instructions should be integrated into the course lesson plans. Improving the student's social skills increases the academic skills of the students through mastery and performance skills and increases correct and acceptable social skills. (Eleby, 2009, p. 39)

Analysing numerous studies in America, Gresham et al. (2001) concluded that meta-analytic reviews of social skills training in schools have yielded a wide variety of results, mainly revealing ineffectual programs being implemented. Based on their review of the literature, Gresham et al. stated that schools are not providing suitable social skills programs. The researchers conducted a meta-analysis of 55 published research studies investigating school based social skill interventions for children and adolescents. The reviewed studies included a total of 147 students ranging from preschool to secondary school. Specifically, social skill interventions produced low treatment effects and low generalisation effects across persons, settings, and play stimuli. Moderate maintenance effects were observed suggesting that when gains were made via social skill interventions, the gains were maintained after the

intervention is withdrawn. The low treatment effects observed in the present study are consistent with the results of previous social skill intervention meta-analyses on other populations of children. Gresham et al. provided a number of recommendations for promoting effective social skills programs. First, they recommended that social skills training should be implemented more frequently and more intensely than what is typically run by schools. Second, they concluded that a major weakness of social skills programs is a failure to produce adequate maintenance and generalisation effects. Gresham et al. attributed this, in part, to the fact that social skills training often takes place in "contrived, restricted, and decontextualized" (p. 340) environments, such as resource rooms or other pullout rooms. Lastly, the researchers believed that the ineffectiveness of many social skills programs is due to the interventionists' failure to match the social skills strategy to the type of skill deficit presented.

Increased attention needs to be paid to describing how interventions are coordinated with the teachers' and the school's other programming. More attention also needs to be given to evaluating implementation, because implementation influences the effectiveness of promotion and prevention programs (Durlak & Dymnicki, 2007), which can significantly enhance children's school experiences.

There are schools that are successfully improving social skills with their existing curriculum programs. Teachers must be equipped with research, studies, proffered suggestions and results to use as educational equipment and tools to assist and help them to teach the student basic academic skills, while teaching and demonstrating acceptable social skills that will benefit them beyond high school (Tatum, 2006). There are, however, many schools which claim to be teaching social skills but are found to be actually taking short cuts or not even implementing the social programs they promise in their curriculum outline - and then there are schools that ignore social skills altogether.

Children who have not developed social skills often have social problems at school. These children struggle academically and socially. While schools address children's learning problems, they often neglect children's social needs and rely on parents and/or professionals to handle these problems. A lack of social skills and the inability to connect with others, form friendships and resolve conflicts can lead to more failure and distress for students than academic problems can" (Lawson, 2003, p. 1). There are many studies outlining the need for social skills programs in schools (Jacobson, 2004). Effectively and professionally

implemented social skills programs can increase student behaviour, learning, academic performance and reduce stress (Durlak & Weissburg, 1991).

The systematic analyses of the literature undertaken showed that there isn't enough focus on social skills in schools. As far back as the 1950s experts have been emphasising that schools do not focus enough on social skills (Bruner, 1973; Rogers, 1951; Vygotsky, 1962). Many studies have explored learning at schools and concluded by encouraging educational settings to foster relationships (Anderson, 2003; Bernard, 2006, 2011).

The expert from the interview provided his opinion on whether schools put a priority on social skills: "No - if they did, then our student outcomes would be superior! And that's clearly one of the big issues that we have; we have enormous variation within schools, not just between schools. So if for example in any one school where the children are basically coming from the same families we have variations within the school because of the understanding of the teacher, the teacher's pedagogical knowledge, and the teacher's content knowledge." Teachers should encourage students to interact, connect and think together about their ideas and experiences in order to stimulate logical and deep thinking and the development of language to express their thoughts and opinions (McInerney et al., 1994). An interesting theory from McInerney links our general living place like home and the community to the school place. He believes both of these settings need to work in harmony to progress in life - "... an effective relationship must exist between the everyday world and the 'schooled world' for learning to be significant, effective and of practical value" (McInerney et al., 1994, p. 102). There is growing and impressive evidence base from investigations of programs around the world, that social skills programs can enhance student development, particularly in ways that are central to the goals of all schools: by improving learning and behaviour (Anderson, 2003; Fuller, 2001).

After a number of years researching social skills and learning, it certainly appears that there is a strong viewpoint that there is not enough focus on social skills in schools. This notion is in line with the studies of Garmezy (1983), Rogers (1951), and Vygotsky (1962). Durlak and Preheim Dupre (2006) have declared, "More attention needs to be paid to evaluating implementation of social skills, because implementation influences the effectiveness of promotion and programs, which can dramatically influence children's school experiences" (p. 14). To properly understand social skills in schools, researchers must give more consideration to the formal and informal ways in which social skills are integrated into the culture, structure

and curriculum of schools. It is not sufficient or realistic to just design targeted, theory-based programs; researchers must diligently attend to evaluating the implementation of social skills and how schools respond to, extend, and adapt programs (Zins et al., 2004). The data and the arguments in Findings 3 correlates to the consistent themes presented in this study presenting the idea that there is a necessity for schools to focus more on social skills.

From the study completed, it shows that schools need to be serious in taking on social skills and ensuring they are a focus for all teachers and classes. Elksnin and Elksnin (2003) found in a study that a large percentage of students (75%) with learning disabilities exhibit social skill deficits and 29% of adolescents with disabilities need specific social skill instruction after completing high school. Likewise, Elias (2003) identified comorbidity between emotional disturbance and language development in 45% of students with learning disabilities, showing that expressive and pragmatic language development impacted on well-being. These students are often not to be accepted by peers, they show shortcomings in the way they interact with peers and adults, along with problems in reading nonverbal and other subtle social cues (Thornton, 2011, p. 31).

There is evidence showing that learning is enhanced by students developing social skills, so it makes sense to take on board skills that will assist people to learn. It may take some work and involve change for some teachers, but it will make life easier in many ways like positive behaviour and increased motivation and enhanced academic results in the long-run. However, when implementing new programs, it needs to be a whole school approach and teachers must be trained effectively, monitored and accountable. In linking the finding that there is a need for more of a focus on social skills in schools, to the larger literature, I found it fascinating that most studies were in agreement for more social skills but that there was a wide gap between how much social skills are needed and how it was going to actually happen. Social skills are vital for all individuals as they enable social connectedness, which is strongly linked to self-esteem, intrinsic motivation, and the inclination to care about one's identity. Zyngier (2003) views social skills as the bridge linking community need with individual intrinsic motivation. We should be working towards a world where people's needs, feelings and contributions are respected, appreciated and valued. Social connectedness is the opposite of the phenomenon of social isolation, which can be linked to increased risk of depression, suicidal thoughts and low self-esteem. Goleman et al. (1999, p. 18) believe that "We seek to understand characteristics that predict better performance because we wish to be more

effective… to understand characteristics that predict more fulfilling lives because we see injustice, suffering and know that many lives are out of balance."

The world is now a different place for most adults for a number of reasons, and to be successful in the 21st century students will need abilities or skills very different from those that are being taught and assessed in high stakes testing today (Sousa, 2010). No wonder there is an incompatibility between today's school practices and the workforce skills that are required in a competitive market. Educational settings could modify their goals and policies to cater for this modern and technologically focused workforce; otherwise, students will be sent into the new workforce lacking the skill set required to survive, let alone be successful. Educational decision-makers need to wake up and be assertive in re-inventing teaching practices and curriculum that will encourage and mould children who have effective social skills and who can interact with others in a positive manner. According to Pink (2006), the capability to understand "relationships between relationships" could be the number one skill for 21st century learning. In other words, being able to understand and communicate with other people (social skills) is extremely important in today's world.

The key comments from the expert's interview (2013) provide possible answers to all three of the research questions. The expert provided many relevant and thought-provoking reflections on education and social skills. The highlights that link to Vygotsky's and Goleman's theories described in this research are:

- Schools are clearly not providing adequate social skills to students;

- Social skills need to be the main focus for schools, allowing students to participate in class and to be part of an effective learning experience;

- All school staff need to participate in whole school professional learning on teaching social skills; and

- Social skills need to be in place to enable students to learn from their teachers and peers.

As Vygotsky states, language influences learning and the knowledge we build in several essential ways, for example:

- It defines our knowledge, or at least major aspects of it. It allows us to define the key concepts or building blocks of a topic in ways that allow us to share and build on what we know. We build relationships and principles between key concepts using language.

- Successful learning involves learners engaging in key interactions that guide the change in learners' knowledge. Language is the medium of this. Learners manage and direct the change, describe aspects of their learning, and transform what they know (Munro, 2011).

Goleman believes that communication between individuals is the key to learning and developing positive relationships. According to Munro (2011, p.), "…students learn by listening and speaking and by thinking in words and sentences. Their oral language determines how they develop social skills and friendships, how they deal with problems, their self-confidence and ultimately who they are."

Overall, the analysis of Vygotsky, Goleman and the expert interviewed in regards to social skills and learning led to many findings that answered the research questions.

**4.3 Conclusion**

In conclusion, I think it is important to make it clear that there is a real need for discussion and debate in the educational setting by leaders and the community on the importance of social skills in learning today. This must happen for education to foster increased understanding that social skills impact on student learning and future success. A common factor of the different studies on social skills and learning is that social skills promote learning. This study has projected to be an attempt to make people aware of the need for social skills to be encouraged and have a high level of importance attached to it in schools. This possible dialogue amongst educational minded people is required to enable coherence and systematisation for educational policies and, more importantly, for student groups, parents, teachers and administration staff involved in the development of curriculum within the parameters of formal education at schools.

A review of literature on social skills and learning by Winner (2010) noted that, in the last decade or more, research has increased in the area of social skills intervention, but there are still many gaps and a lack of information regarding the impact of such interventions on pre-schoolers and adolescents, while research in relation to the impact of social skills on learning has not been a focus as it was decades ago. Quinn and Poirer (2004) believe there is little research which has analysed programs such as social skills instruction. This has effectively contributed to a view that there is still much to do in adequately teaching social skills to

children and teenagers. Much educational research relating to social skills and learning in Australia, America and England has also focused on social skills programs and their impact on behaviour modification. Studies of the effects of such programs on academic outcomes have been relatively scarce. According to Kendziora (2004), there are several effective social skills programs providing students with successful skills to get along with each other; however, there is a great need for an increase in research and in the number of schools implementing the programs known to be beneficial.

Yet voices are being heard within the education research community that social skills in schools, particularly the teachers' perspectives, have not been studied as much as they could have been. Teachers are the main identifiers of students' needs, behaviours and learning outcomes, so why haven't there been major studies into examining teachers' perspectives of social skills so as to determine vital requirements and possible changes? A key educational expert, John Dewey, for a long time described how social skills and in particular emotions play a major role in learning. He believed that the failure to identify and accommodate the fundamental role of the emotions in learning is to ignore basic learner needs in achieving outcomes (Dewey, 1938). The human species is set apart from other species due to our emotional nature, need for interaction and our propensity for making decisions based on emotion. Dewey (2008) argued that "human experience is made human through the existence of associations and recollections, which are strained through the mesh of imagination so as to suit the demands of the emotions" (p. 104).

From completing all the readings and synthesis, I have found that research believes social skills are vital for learning. It allows an individual to interact, feel part of the process and enables them to absorb and share information. Both Vygotsky and Goleman have many theories involving social skills influencing the learning practise. The educational expert fully supports this idea as well, in fact he believes it goes hand-in hand. In almost all of the readings I ploughed through, by searching the topic 'learning', they mentioned students learning from one another as well as the teacher. This can only happen through the coming together of the learners, and interacting and listening to each other, which relies on social skills.

This chapter explained the findings and discussion to the research questions. It is hoped that this study has provided some answers and raised more awareness of social skills and their

effect on learning to create increased discussion. The next chapter will look at limitations of the study, go through a summary of findings and discuss larger implications/future research.

# CHAPTER FIVE: IMPLICATIONS & CONCLUSION

## 5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, the researcher presents fundamental conclusions based on the analysis of the systematic literature review and educational expert's interview in order to answer the research questions and fulfil the thesis purpose. This chapter includes a section on larger implications/future research to conclude this study with a succinct and optimistic view of learning.

## 5.2 Limitations of the study

In research projects there are often limitations. For this study limitations would be: with the data included, all the age groups are not consistently researched or age groups are omitted; moreover, the study involved uses mixed methods which may confuse some readers; also, the study does not include quantitative research methodology and finally, many people are not aware of theoretical analysis utilising literature review as a main approach.

As stated earlier, the bulk of contemporary research in the area of social skills and academic performance tends to be focused on teenagers. There have been few studies investigating the effects on academic performance of specific strategies designed to facilitate school connectedness (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, School Connectedness, 2009). In the researcher's opinion, it is actually more important to research the middle childhood age group (eight to twelve years), as this is where children can begin having negative feelings and experiences. Traditionally, middle childhood has not been viewed as an important stage in human development. Nevertheless, modern theorists have established the importance of middle childhood for the growth of personality, cognitive skills, motivation and relationships. In addition, throughout middle childhood children discover the values of their family, community and societies. Middle childhood can be an exciting and enjoyable time for most children involving more freedom, stronger friendships and increasing their interests, like sports, hobbies or music. Students who have the ability and work hard successfully complete the academic tasks and challenges throughout this stage of education and generally go on to do well, but those who do not succeed in developing the required skills and performance often struggle and fall further behind in later grades (Knowles & Brown, 2000).

Readers of this study may consider including only one interview as a limitation; however, the main purpose of this research is to focus on and draw upon, then compare and contrast, and finally synthesise the theories of two of the most influential international experts in the area of social skills. The information and theories gleaned from Vygotsky and Goleman have been highly significant. The interview presented was to add the expertise of an additional theorist thereby enhancing the validity, reliability and generalisability of this literature analysis in the local context.

Some may say sections of Vygotsky's theory included in this research are a "bit old". However, by including this information it shows that many of the negative behaviours from the past are enduring and some have even increased. Sometimes old theory is good theory. A lot of these issues and student behaviours persist and need to be tackled. In the field of social skills, by comparing Vygotsky's theories and Goleman's theories and using synthesis it shows that there has not been paradigmatic change or an ending phase in social skills and behaviours, but a continuum in theory. Vygotsky's theories have not been discounted or discarded, but remain current and useful when considered against Goleman's theories and the local academic theorist.

## 5.3 Summary of findings

In summary of the findings, this study has highlighted that social skills do affect learning and they are a positive influence, but schools are not focusing enough on teaching social skills. Two main types of educational theorists, Constructivists and Cognitivists, both propose that social skills are key to learning and many studies were put forward to support this claim. As early as Plato up until now, researchers have been alluding to the need for social skills. Yet, research was provided showing that schools are not providing suitable amounts of social skills teaching and as a result we have behavioural issues, poor academic achievement, school refusal and bullying on a daily basis. The objectives of all schools must be to establish an environment and teaching that fosters learning and the ability to positively interact with others (social skills).

There is no denying that there have been many comprehensive studies on learning and social skills and some even looked at the role of social skills on learning. However, the majority of these studies have not delved into the specific results of how social skills or the lack of them,

can affect learning. As a result, it is with strong conviction that it is suggested that for decades we have not progressed on the development of and the implementation of effectively teaching social skills. In fact, in the last five years, it could be said we have gone backwards due to focusing too heavily on technological devices. The lack of systematic focus on the effect of social skills on learning and the other related features observed in this study - how social skills affect learning and whether schools are focusing enough on such skills, has hindered our understanding of the complexity involved in the effective development of learning and social skills.

Throughout the systematic literature review, a repeated theme coming from the research was that appropriate social skills are essential to successful development, day-to-day functioning, and any form of achievement in life. With the proliferation of negative societal influences and strains on family life, it is crucial that schools partner with parents to accelerate this social skills development (Graetza, et al. 2008).

The challenge for educational settings is to engage learners socially and academically so that they have the intrinsic motivation to perform to the best of their ability and become the best people they can be. Those educational settings need to ensure that students are provided with opportunities to participate in meaningful activities involving social interaction. There are many ways to create such opportunities in each lesson or day. Some effective methods are: ask students for their opinions; increase response time allowed for teacher questions; introduce critical/reflective thinking activities and hands-on tasks; involve students in curriculum planning using participatory evaluation strategies; introduce peer helping and cross-age mentoring; use group work; enable community service, and so on. This style of learning connects learners to their school, teachers and peers and can stimulate all the qualities of resilience: social competence, problem solving, autonomy and a positive outlook. Educational research reveals that a positive and nurturing school environment has the potential to ameliorate great risk factors in the lives of children (Bernard, 1993).

Instead of Vygotsky's student-centred and humanistic educational perspective, what is found presently in the majority of countries is a movement to restore a division between cognition and emotion in education. It is a movement that suits a political and economic setting drastically at odds with making real change. The focus on individual assessment does not take into account the history of relational learning between children and their caregivers, teachers, and peers, just as standardized assessments of problem-solving do not reflect conceptual

learning. Individuals learn and grow through social relationships, emotional experiences with language, and cultural semiotics. If the aims of education are to provide knowledge and skills, to learn how to get along with others; to be culturally informed and accepting, and to become an active and caring participant in our world, then what goals are required for schools, how can schools modify their environments, and what role in learning does interaction and emotional development play?

There are educational experts who encourage schools to focus more on social skills and to be increasingly focused on individuals' needs, highlighting and encouraging feelings of self-efficacy, and trying to motivate positive outcomes in students, such as self-regulation, engagement in learning and improved performance (Connell & Wellborn, 1991) – rather than persisting in being authoritarian, dictatorial, rigid and bureaucratic organisations. If schools are not implementing social skills programs, or are authoritarian, they will be unable to generate such important skills, driven rather by competing goals and wrong priorities. Connell and Wellborn (1991) propose that schools nurture student and teacher participation to foster interaction and connectedness. All schools have the capacity and resources to do so, and are *obligated* to provide programs and lessons on social skills and self-government in learning if they truly wish to encourage and enhance students' and teachers' independence, enthusiasm and motivation.

## 5.4 Larger implications/future research

The results of the present study suggest avenues for further research. The educational community would find this research beneficial for both social and academic contexts. It would provide current and relevant research data showing the link between school skills and academic outcomes, and be a valuable resource for schools, teachers, community leaders and parents with children who are at risk socially. In a 'community of learners', adults, parents and children enjoy themselves and learn more when there is 'shared and interested participation in joint endeavours' (Rogoff et al. 2001, p. 8). If school leaders take this research on board and are proactive in modifying their educational environments and methods, they will, one hopes, prevent students experiencing disconnectedness at school and suffering its consequences, such as absenteeism. It would be preferable to being reactive and implementing interventions. This study is vital for educational decision-makers, political players and parents in demonstrating the importance of spending time and effort to make

children happy, enabling them to develop strong relationships, and be socially comfortable in their school or workplace. There are too many children simply attending classes and achieving minimal outcomes, and getting their names ticked off the list. Children need to be part of the educational process, socially engaging with peers, and producing work collaboratively, with thinking and inquiry skills as a focus – not being robots taught using olden days teaching strategies that rely on memorisation. An educational environment may be interpreted as a community of learners when adults and children engage in 'intersubjectivity' - 'how humans come to know each other's minds' (Bruner, 1996, p. 12). Rogoff (2001) argues that both students and teachers should participate in learning activities in a collaborative manner, with obligations to develop and nurture children's learning. This perspective rejects the dichotomy of teacher-directed learning and children-controlled learning.

There is a body of research arguing that learning social skills improve students' health and safety: Bandura (1961), Bernard (2006, 2011), CASEL (2008), Goleman (1995, 1999), Piaget (1965), for example. It is clear that most theorists believe there is a great need for educational institutions to build supportive and comfortable environments which contribute to improved outcomes, both in academic results and social ability. Carl Rogers was one of the most influential proponents of the humanistic approach based on a psychological methodology stressing that learning needs to include a healthy development of one's self and of what one should be, and the skills of interacting with others (Kirschenbaum et al., 1989). The theoretical framework and theories that will underpin this research are drawn largely from Vygotsky and Goleman, supported by Bandura, Bernard, Dewey, Hirsch, Lipman, Piaget and Rogers. All have all carried out comprehensive investigations into learning and teaching theories and practices which have supported social development in learning and the importance of relationships.

Educator Lantieri (2013, cited in *The Age*, McSweeney, p. 5) believes that the world has changed for our children, but for some reason we haven't revised or modified what we provide for them, such as the resources or the life skills they require to cope or to succeed in that world. It seems obvious to some, but not others, that schools had better be concerned about students' lack of social skills because research shows that an inability to get along with others can have a negative impact on student learning. Increasingly, children are going to school ill-equipped for the social and learning demands that are placed upon them (Robinson, 2004; Klopovic, Vasu & Yearwood, 2003). Children need to learn social skills through explicit teaching. This only happens if schools have social skills programs in their curriculum

and the teaching staff actually implement the lessons. Social skills should be taught early in life, as negative behaviour due to lack of social skills can cause children to develop serious emotional and behavioural problems. Such students often do not attract formal attention or receive services until it is too late (Lamar & Gatfield, 2006). They endure obstacles to learning which mean they battle to cope during their education and later in life. George, Harrower and Knoster (2003), and Arbor and Graves (2002) believe that educational settings need to ensure provision of  programs, or of explicit teaching, and of preventative measures that remove social and behavioural barriers, allowing for successful learning to take place for all participants. There is solid empirical support for the effectiveness of social interventions or school programs on students' learning outcomes (Klopovic, Vasu & Yearwood, 2003). If schools are proactive in teaching social skills before any negative behaviour becomes permanent and intensifies, the behaviour is much more manageable and open to modification.

In discussions about education in school, academic and parent forums, the notion of a 'whole-school' approach to educational issues is often raised. It is a significant factor in relation to social skills and learning. Many experts believe social skills programs are useless unless there is a whole-school approach involving all school staff and parents, as well as being included in the curriculum. The local expert from Chapter 3.2.3 in this study believes:

> I think every teacher should be a teacher of social skills. They need to have an agreement in the school about what is acceptable and how it is going to be implemented. So, in the same way that every school has to have anti-bullying programs and a discipline and management program, so there needs to be an agreed-upon social skills program; and it's taught from the early days at the beginning of the school year in each classroom and it's reinforced by every teacher whether it's primary or secondary. A child goes from one secondary classroom to another based on subjects for example, then the worst thing that can happen to a child is to have different expectations, social expectations by the teachers. There needs to be consistency, the children need to know what they can and can't do, and they need to have what we call authoritative teachers, not authoritarian; authoritative teachers who are quite clear and explicit about their expectations and they are transmitted in a clear and positive way to the students and they are consistent across subjects and across classrooms.

Additionally, the local expert interviewed in this study stated: "…if there's not a coherent policy it's a divide and conquer situation, and children become confused and teachers become irritable and disengaged if it's not consistent and they'll throw their hands up in the air and say 'well, why do I need to do this when my next door neighbour is actually doing the opposite?'"

Further research into this topic is warranted, as we need to understand how social skills affect our learning and daily lives. In this study, the researcher has presented two theories on how social skills impact on learning in the hope that they will generate further thought, inspiration and research.

**5.5 Conclusion**

This literature review has employed a sociocultural approach to reconsider social skills for their potential in helping language educators and researchers raise questions from a holistic viewpoint and gain contextual understanding of the learning processes. Young people will not experience a more life-changing time than when they are being taught by a skilled, passionate and caring teacher who can mould their students into respectful and inspired people, resuscitating children's desire for true learning.

The last word on Vygotsky and Goleman for this study: After completing an abundance of readings from, and on, the two experts named above, I can categorically state that the main insight I have gained is that they were (Vygotsky) or are (Goleman) motivated to search for the truth about the best way to learn and become a successful person. Both have provided the world with critical and radical information on learning and positive social interaction, but somehow I think the subject of this study will continue to exercise the minds of many researchers to come.

The researcher's personal recommendation for effective learning is to adopt a 'whole-school' approach to the incorporation of social skills by changing or adjusting policies in educational settings. Any positive change is triggered by an organisation's agreed policies, which dictate all decision-making. Fundamentally, it involves working on a number of levels at once in a coordinated and progressive way. To create 'the emotionally literate school' (Weare, 2004), substantial effort has to go into ensuring congruence between the various parts, so that one part of the school is not undermining work that is being carried out elsewhere. Social skills programs need to include explicit teaching and learning programs that cultivate key skills, attitudes and behaviours in pupils and staff if they are to be effective. Educational programs that rely solely on environmental changes are less effective (Catalano et al., 2002). Effective teaching of social skills programs calls for the use of all the active and engaging methods of teaching and learning at a school's disposal, such as whole of class, groups, one-to-one, circle time, peer work, games, simulations, projects, outside activity, school trips and homework projects - to mention just a few of the learning opportunities available to the inventive teacher.

To change our educational system in this direction will require a real revolution in education, since not only the methods but also the goals of education may need changing. It will not be easy; there is and will be opposition from those who see the change as displacing or detracting from cognitive education and from those who believe that affective education is the province of other social institutions, of the family and the church. Unfortunately, these institutions are no longer reliably performing this task, a task that is vital if society is to survive. If the school does not perform it, some other institution may need to be developed to do so. It would be inefficient and ineffective to attempt to split the individual into cognitive and affective elements, each to be educated in a different institution. The individual is a whole and his or her cognitive and affective development intermesh and ought to be developed together. The same psychological conditions are essential for optimal cognitive and affective development.

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix 1: The Interview Questions

| Interview Question |
|---|
| Q1. Do you think social skills influence learning in group situations? |
| Q2. If yes, in what ways do you feel social skills in classrooms enhance learning and performance? |
| Q3. What are the main challenges you feel that teachers experience in implementing social skills into the school curriculum? |
| Q4. What additional skills or resources do you feel need to be developed or provided before teachers use social skills effectively in classrooms? |
| Q5. What educational programs or curriculum and pedagogy may help foster social skills in schools? |
| Q6. What will be the main challenges you feel that teachers and state jurisdictions may experience in assessing the benefits of social skills - because they're written up by ACARA now - on the school curriculum, but assessing them might be a difficult thing, so...? |
| Q7. What educational practices may impede the teaching of social skills in a class? |
| Q8. What reactions are you aware of by teachers to social skills in general in schools? Do you think they are negative, positive, or not fussed? |
| Q9. What will be the main challenges you feel that teachers may experience in planning or trying to teach social skills? |
| Q10. How may existing psychological theories inform the way schools foster social skills so as to promote learning? |
| Q11. What teacher professional learning do you feel teachers need to implement social skills? |
| Q.12 To conclude, generally, how do you think social skills impact on one's learning? |

Q13. What are your thoughts on society at the moment and social skills? Because there seems to be a lot in the news.

Q14. Do you believe schools are responsible for teaching children social skills?